

## The successive chiefs named Wabasha /

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### **THE SUCCESSIVE CHIEFS NAMED WABASHA.\***

\* An address by Hon. Charles C. Willson, of Rochester, Minn., life member of this Historical Society, at a meeting of the Old Settlers of Southeastern Minnesota, in Winona, February 12, 1906.

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It is probable that Groseilliers and Radisson, French fur traders, were the first white men who saw a Dakota Indian. They left Three Rivers and Montreal in the summer of 1654 and went to Green bay on Lake Michigan, and thence probably to the upper Mississippi river and to Prairie island in Minnesota. In 1656 they went back to sell their furs and obtain more goods. During their second western expedition, starting in 1659, they came by the way of Lake Superior to the vicinity of Knife lake in Kanabec county of this state, and thence visited the Sioux or Dakotas of the great buffalo prairies, probably adjoining the Minnesota river, in the spring of 1660. In the late summer of that year they returned to Montreal with a large quantity of valuable furs. Their success induced other traders to send out expeditions to this northwestern country to trade with the Indians.

Father Hennepin was the first priest to see Minnesota, coming here in the spring of 1680. He was a Recollect. The Jesuits came later, after the fur traders had opened the way, and built a chapel in 1727 at Fort Beauharnois on the Minnesota shore of Lake Pepin near the present village of Frontenac. Hennepin met Duluth and five French soldiers on the Mississippi, who went with him to the Sioux villages near Mille Lacs.

In 1683, Nicolas Perrot and other traders and voyageurs, including Le Sueur, came to this region with goods to trade for furs. The winters were then, as now, practically more than four months long. It was the season in which furs were taken, and the Wisconsin and Minnesota streams and swamps were frozen over, extended travel and transportation by land being rendered practicable.

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### **THE WABASHA OR RED LEAF COUNTRY.**

The early fur traders came up the Great Lakes and usually crossed Wisconsin to the Mississippi river in the winter, either from Green bay on Lake Michigan or from Chequamegon bay on Lake Superior. The trees in the eastern forests to which they were accustomed and those around the Great Lakes were either evergreen or deciduous, shedding their leaves in the fall. They were surprised to see the red leaves remaining on our scrub oaks throughout the winter, and because of it called this region the red leaf country.

These oaks (*Quercus tinctoria* and *Q. rubra*) maintain a stubborn contest with the prairie fires for existence. They live only on barren hillsides or along the borders of streams that stay the prairie fires, or in ravines where winter winds have piled the snows too deep to melt and disappear until the green grass of spring renders fires on the prairie no longer possible. If the fire sometimes reaches and kills the bole above the ground, the roots below send out new shoots around the dead stump, which shoots grow until they in turn fall as did the parent stem. The rugged scrub oak bushes or small trees thus persist and show their red winter foliage over a large portion of the broken land along the river bluffs and up the tributary streams.

For the interests of trade, the early French *coureurs de bois* soon learned a good part of the Dakota words. "Wapa" or "waba" was leaf, and "sha" was red. In the structure of the

Dakota language the qualifying adjective follows the substantive. Hence red leaf in the Dakota tongue became Wabasha.

### **THE WABASHA DYNASTY AND DOMINION.**

In Europe at that time (1660–1700) provincial France was held under feudal tenures and titles. The nobleman who held a big estate and ruled over the province was called after the name of his province. Following the French example, the fur traders called the Indian chief of this red leaf country Wabasha. Thus arose the name of the Dakota dynasty of successive hereditary chiefs that ruled the southeastern part of Minnesota for near two hundred years.

The southern boundary of their dominion was determined by a treaty made at Prairie du Chien, August 19, 1825, to prevent disputes and war between them and the confederated Sacs and 505 Foxes on the south. William Clark and Lewis Cass acted on behalf of the United States; the second Wabasha, Little Crow, Sleepy Eyes, and others, for the Dakotas; Keokuk, Waukauche, and others, for the Sacs; and Tiamah, Misowin, and others, for the Foxes. The line agreed upon commenced at the mouth of the Upper Iowa river (near the southeast corner of Minnesota) and ascended that river to its left fork, thence up that fork to its source, thence running in a direct line to the second or upper fork of the Des Moines river, and thence to the lower fork of the Calumet (now the Big Sioux river). This line was near what is now the southern boundary of Minnesota.

It was not a new line between these warring tribes, but an official delimitation of the old boundary between them. It did not stay the strife, however, and on July 15, 1830, at Prairie du Chien, Wabasha and his principal councilors made a further treaty with the United States and the Sacs and Foxes, by which each Indian party ceded to the United States their lands within twenty miles on either side of this line. But it was stipulated therein that this strip of land forty miles wide was to be assigned and allotted, under the direction of the

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President, to such other tribes of Indians as he might see fit to locate thereon for hunting and other purposes.

By the ninth article of the same treaty the Dakota half-breeds were given a reservation fifteen miles wide on the west bank of Lake Pepin, commencing at Barn bluff, Red Wing, and running thence southerly about thirty-two miles to a point opposite Beef slough.

The Wabasha dynasty claimed and exercised jurisdiction over the eastern bank of the Mississippi opposite Winona, for at least twenty-five miles either way, up and down the stream, and over the islands therein. But on September 29, 1837, by a treaty executed at Washington, D. C., the Dakotas relinquished all their rights and claims to the east bank and to the islands.

On the north and west the Dakotas held the country under other chiefs, but whenever a Wabasha was present at a council he took precedence. The exclusive domain of the Wabashas did not extend beyond the Cannon river on the north or the Straight river on the west. Their sway was unquestioned over the district 506 that comprises now the counties of Houston, Fillmore, Mower, Winona, Olmsted, Dodge, Wabasha, and a large part of Goodhue, Rice, and Steele counties, an area of more than five thousand square miles. Within that territory the reigning Wabasha was in older times the lord of all. On the lands drained by the Root river or the Zumbro, no Indian could camp or hunt without his consent. On the rising land south of Root river the confederated Sacs and Foxes sometimes appeared with hostile intent, but on the Zumbro never.

The broad expanding branches and short trunk of the Zumbro river resemble in form an ancient English oak, growing in the open field. The Dakotas called this river the Wazi Oju, that is, place of the pine tree. A few lordly white pines are found now and then on islands or sheltered places on its higher tributaries. Their green tops are in winter seen long distances away. No other pines are found west of these on this side of the Missouri.

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By the French this river was called Des Embarras (Difficulties), because of its numerous shallow rapids and rocky falls. After they left the country the Englishman came in due time and asked the Indians the name of the river. They gave him the white man's name for it, as near as they could speak it. The Englishman understood it to be Zumbro, and so wrote it in his journal. The name thus created has adhered, and it is not found elsewhere in any part of the world. The Indian name Wazi Oju was anglicised into Wasioja, and is now held by a township in Dodge county, on the south fork of the middle branch of our Zumbro.

The Territory of Minnesota was established by the Federal Act of March 3, 1849. Hon. Alexander Ramsey of Pennsylvania was appointed governor. A Legislative Council and House of Assembly were elected. They convened September 3, 1849, and subdivided the territory into nine counties. All south of a line running due west from a point on the Mississippi river opposite the mouth of the St. Croix river, was erected into a county and appropriately named Wabasha. In 1852 it was attached for judicial purposes to the county of Washington, and terms of courts were appointed to be held at Stillwater. By subsequent acts this vast area was subdivided into numerous counties as now shown on the map, and this vicinity of the present cities of Winona and Rochester lost 507 the name of Wabasha, to which it seems to me it was justly entitled.

The prairie here at Winona between the river and the western bluff was the principal abiding place of the Wabashas. It was called Wing Prairie, and the Indian village was called Keoxa or Kiuksa and here was their council ground.

### **THE ELDER WABASHA.**

Wabasha the First, whom the French fur traders found ruler in this country of the red leaf, during his youth entered into alliance with the agents of Louis XIV, surnamed Le Grand, King of France. All Canada was then a French province, and that nation then and for a generation afterward controlled the Great Lakes and the Indians on the adjacent shores.

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The merchants of Quebec and Montreal monopolized the fur trade of the Northwest then just developing.

Wolfe's victory on the Plains of Abraham in September, 1759, with the consequent fall of Quebec, was the death blow to French dominion in North America. In the year 1762 France ceded Louisiana to Spain; and in 1763, by the Treaty of Versailles, she ceded Canada to the English and withdrew altogether from this continent. Most of the French traders left the red leaf country, and their places were taken by British subjects.

So long as the French held the Great Lakes and the northwestern fur trade, Wabasha and the Dakotas generally assisted them in the struggle against the English. Time will permit me to mention only a few of the known incidents in the lives of the three successive heads of the dynasty of the Wabashas. For four years after the fall of Quebec, up to the Treaty of Versailles, the supplies of goods to the Indian traders in the Dakota country were scant and irregular. Often the Indians could not get ammunition for the chase and suffered great privation. They had become accustomed to the use of fire-arms, and could now rarely kill a buffalo with the old bow and arrow.

Ixkatapay, a Dakota Indian, quarreled at this time with the trader they called the Mallard Duck, located near Mendota, and, watching his opportunity, shot the trader as he sat smoking in his cabin. This and the fall of Quebec alarmed the traders, and they mostly withdrew with their goods from the Dakota country. 508 Winter coming on, the Indians suffered many hardships. In the spring they held a council and resolved to surrender Ixkatapay to justice and implore the traders to return. They selected a delegation of nearly a hundred to go to Quebec on this mission, with Ixkatapay as prisoner. Wabasha the elder was the leader of the party. They went by way of the Wisconsin and Fox rivers, but before they reached Green bay one after another deserted. There all but six turned back, taking Ixkatapay with them. The aged chief Wabasha and five others, true to their trust, kept on their way.

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Reaching Quebec, he explained the situation and the necessitous condition of his people, and offered himself for execution for the murder of the trader, in the place and stead of Ixkatapay, but implored the merchants to send ammunition and goods at once to his suffering people to exchange for their peltry. Struck with his noble character, the English gave him a medal instead of death; but the smallpox broke out among them, and all but Wabasha perished by that disease. He returned with the traders, and resumed his residence where this city of Winona now stands.

But he did not end his days in peace. His brothers rose against him; he was expelled; and soon afterward he died at a winter lodge which he had on the bank of the Root river twenty-five miles away to the southwest. He was the son of an Ojibway woman taken as a prisoner of war by his father and made a wife.

### **THE SECOND WABASHA.**

His son, Wabasha the Second, succeeded to the office of chief. He was not a warrior, as he had in youth lost one eye while playing the game of lacrosse. But he was shrewd and politic. He at once made an alliance with the British, which he maintained throughout our war of the Revolution, and covertly up to, and openly during, our second war of 1812.

He was with other Indians at the unsuccessful siege by the British, in 1813, of Fort Meigs on the Maumee river in northwestern Ohio. The fort was then held by the Americans under William Henry Harrison, later elected President. The Winnebagoes, having killed an American soldier, appointed a feast at which each guest was to eat a morsel of the soldier's body. One of the Dakotas, on being invited, said, "We came here, not to eat the Americans, but to wage war against them." Then Wabasha said to the Winnebagoes, "We thought that you who live near to white men were wiser than we are who live at a distance; but it must indeed be otherwise, if you do such deeds." The result was that the feast was not held.

After the treaty of peace made at Ghent, December 24, 1814, the British agents in Canada sent invitations to the Dakota chiefs to come to a council to be held on Drummond Island, about fifty miles east of the Strait of Mackinaw. Wabasha, Little Crow, and others went. The agents explained to them that the King across the ocean had made peace with the Americans, and that hostilities must cease. After lauding the valor of the Indians, the British offered them blankets, knives, and others goods as presents, but they were rejected. Wabasha said, "You told us that you would never let fall the hatchet until the Americans were driven out, that your King would never make peace without consulting us. You now say that this peace was made by your King without the knowledge of his war chiefs. What is this to us? Will these presents pay for the men we have lost, or make good your promises to us? For myself, I am an old man, I have lived long and have always found means of support, and can do so still." Thereupon Little Crow gave the goods a kick, and they all went back home in fit frame of mind to make an alliance with the Americans.

On July 19, 1815, at Portage des Sioux, between the Mississippi and Missouri rivers about ten miles above their confluence, these Indians made a treaty of peace and amity with the United States. It provides that every injury and act of hostility committed by either party against the other shall be mutually forgiven and forgot, and that perpetual peace and friendship shall be renewed. Commissioned officers of the American Army, wearing their sidearms, often visited the Indians; but the earlier French and British visitors were rarely of a rank to bear a sword. Hence, to distinguish the Americans from the others, the Indian populace called the Americans "the Long Knives."

Wabasha's name is not on this treaty of July, 1815. Major Thomas Forsyth visited him here at Winona August 13, 1819, and reported of him, "This man is no beggar, nor does he drink." The date of his death I have been unable to ascertain.

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### **THE THIRD WABASHA.**



His son, Wabasha the Third, succeeded him. In 1832 the Sacs and Foxes revolted under Black Hawk and crossed over the Mississippi into northwestern Illinois, massacring every white person they could find. When troops were gathered and moved against them, they retreated north through southwestern Wisconsin but were overtaken July 21, 1832, by General Dodge on the banks of the Wisconsin river, and were defeated. Black Hawk then retreated northwest to the Bad Axe river, in what is now Vernon county, Wisconsin. On its north bank the Winnebagoes assembled and disputed his further progress in that direction. He and his followers then turned down the Bad Axe to the Mississippi, near the southeast corner of Minnesota, and occupied an island, now known as Battle island. News of these events was carried up the river to Wabasha. He at once assembled his available warriors and went down the west bank of the river to have a hand in the fray. Such an opportunity for the scalps of his hereditary enemy was not to be lost. Before he could reach the scene of action, Captain Zach. Taylor (afterward President) came up the river with regulars by steamer, and, landing on the island, routed Black Hawk out and drove those who survived across the river onto the Neutral Land. Then Wabasha and his band arrived and took bloody vengeance on the surviving Sacs and Foxes who reached the shore. This occasion was the most gratifying to his tribe, among all that occurred in his career.

On September 15, following this battle, the United States made a treaty with the Winnebagoes and gave them the Neutral Ground on Little Iowa river, in exchange for their lands east of Lake Winnebago in Wisconsin. But they did not occupy it until the summer of 1838. They became dissatisfied, and on October 13, 1846, made another treaty at Washington, D. C., whereby they relinquished all rights to the Neutral Ground and agreed to remove to a reservation on the west bank of the Mississippi, north of St. Cloud, selected for them by Hon. Henry M. Rice. A large portion of the Winnebagoes soon afterward became desirous of going to the Missouri instead. But in June, 1848, a start was made north, a part going by land up the west bank of the Mississippi and the rest by steamboat.

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When they reached Wabasha's village, where this city now stands, they refused to go further. Wabasha united with them in their remonstrances, and promised to give them a home on this prairie between the river and the bluffs. They made threatening speeches and prepared for battle. Rice sent the steamboat on with the news to Fort Snelling. Captain Seth Eastman, with a company of infantry and two six-pounders, came back on her. These troops, with the dragoons from Fort Atkinson and sixty armed teamsters, overawed the Indians, and most of the Winnebagoes went on north; but some, deserting, returned to Wisconsin or to the Neutral Ground. Rice, with a lieutenant and two soldiers, then went to Wabasha's lodge, arrested him, and took him prisoner to Fort Snelling. He was soon after released with admonition, and he returned with a better appreciation of the white man's power.

He was always averse to missionaries of the gospel, and repeatedly refused to allow them to abide in his territory. When told the story of the resurrection, he said he did not believe it and did not want it preached to his people.

On June 30, 1851, negotiations were opened at Traverse des Sioux (near the present city of St. Peter) with the western Dakotas, which resulted in the treaty with them of July 23 of that year. The United States Senate objected to one of the articles of this treaty, and on July 26, 1852, proposed an amendment, which was accepted by the Indians at St. Paul on September 6, 1852.

After the commissioners had concluded their labors at Traverse des Sioux, they came down the Minnesota on a flatboat, and on July 29, 1851, met Wabasha and all the eastern Dakotas at Mendota, with whom they made a similar treaty on August 5, 1851. This treaty was signed by Luke Lea and Alexander Ramsey on behalf of the United States, and by Wabasha, Little Crow, Shakopee, and over sixty headmen on behalf of the Medawakantonwan and Wahpekuta bands. Like the preceding treaty with the western

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bands, this was also amended by the Senate, and the amendment was ratified by the eastern chiefs at St. Paul on September 4, 1852.

By these treaties all the lands of the Dakotas east of lakes Traverse and Kampeska, and east of the Calumet of Big Sioux river, were ceded to the United States, save a Reservation ten miles wide 512 on either side of the Minnesota river above New Ulm. Wabasha and his people agreed to remove to the Reservation within two years thereafter, or sooner if required by the President.

Wabasha opposed these treaties, well foreseeing that they ended his rule and dominion over his people. But the traders and all the inhabitants of St. Paul and vicinity were eager for them, and the Indian warriors and young men were persuaded in their favor and really compelled Wabasha to yield a reluctant assent. In 1853, Wabasha and his bands went to the Reservation, on which they lived until the outbreak of 1862.

He also opposed this outbreak and did all he could to prevent it, and when overruled he refused to take part in it. These events are well known history, and need not be here reviewed. He hated the whites for inducing his young men to overthrow his counsel at Mendota and compel him to sell his province. But he had too much sense to believe for a moment that he could regain his land by massacre and war. He died April 23, 1876, at Santee Agency, Nebraska, when his second son, Napoleon, succeeded him as Wabasha the Fourth.

This last representative of the hereditary line of chiefs was born at Shakopee in 1844. He is still living at the Santee Agency, and is recognized as chief by the remnant of Medawakantonwan Dakotas still in existence.

Only a few of the incidents in the lives of these chiefs have been narrated, but enough to show something of the character of each. Sufficient is known to make a volume. Will

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not some young man here today undertake the task of writing a history of this dynasty? It ought to appeal to the local pride of us all.

One of the counties of this state, in the northern part of the district formerly under the Wabasha's dominion, the city which is its county seat, and one of the principal streets of St. Paul, bear this name.

When another fifty years shall have passed over Winona, the stranger coming here will no doubt see in your Public Park a bronze statue of heroic size, representing the elder Wabasha with bowed head offering himself a sacrifice for his people in the place of the murderer, Ixkatapay. I venture to predict that when I and most of us here shall be utterly forgotten, the deeds of the Wabashas will fill a memorable page in history, and their names will be celebrated in song.